

Health Care Extra

Remote patient monitoring cuts costs

Health plans, home health agencies and hospitals are using telemedicine to help manage members' chronic diseases and avoid hospital readmissions and unnecessary visits to emergency departments, and to address rising health care costs.

Pinnacle Awards

Priority Health's use of telemedicine for Medicare patients with heart failure has **reduced health plan and hospital costs** by reducing inpatient stays, said Mary Cooley, Priority Health's director of care management for Medicare.

Telemedicine is the use of communications, usually telephone or the Internet, to provide consulting, examinations and diagnostic testing.

Now contracting with a dozen home health agencies statewide, Priority Health began the heart failure telemedicine project in 2009 for Medicare Advantage members, Cooley said.

In 2010, Priority expanded the program to 18,000 commercial, Medicaid and Medicare Advantage members, she said.

Not all patients with heart failure qualify for the program. To become eligible, members must meet four qualifying criteria: a recent hospitalization with heart failure; a history of failing to adhere to treat-



“This is new technology that only before was used by the Veterans Administration. We are looking to use this for other conditions.”

Mary Cooley, Priority Health

ment plans; a visit to the ER for uncontrolled fluid overload; and comorbid conditions like cardiovascular disease, said Cooley, a nurse.

Cooley said Priority Health expected to reduce ER visits and hospitalizations, and wasn't disappointed.

During the past two years, Priority saw a **34.7 percent reduction in ER and inpatient costs** for a total of 383 patients with heart failure, she said. **Inpatient days declined 36 percent, and inpatient costs dropped by 40 percent**, she said.

How does the system work? After members are accepted into the telemedicine program, one of Priority Health's home health partners installs a “black box” telemedicine device in the patient's home. The black box is connected to a wireless weight scale and blood pressure cuff.

Each day before 10 a.m. members

weigh in and take their blood pressure. The readings are monitored by nurses in the home health agency office, which forwards the data to Priority Health's nursing team. Doctors are notified of clinical changes.

Priority Health pays the home health agencies a monthly fee to install the black boxes, equipment and for monitoring, Cooley said.

Cooley said the health plan saves money but also patients have a higher quality of life.

While other health plans use telemedicine to track patient conditions, Cooley said Priority Health is the first HMO in the nation to pay home health agencies to monitor their patients.

“This is new technology that only before was used by the Veterans Administration,” Cooley said. “We are looking to use this for other conditions.”

— Jay Greene